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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: RIAD SEIF COMMENTS ON PRESS CONFERENCE, DISCUSSES
PLANS FOR ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTE

REF: DAMASCUS 254

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a February 1 conversation with PolOff, prominent opposition figure Riad Seif discussed the SARG's prevention of the released Damascus Spring detainees' January 31 press conference and explained some of his requests for U.S. support in greater depth. In a later meeting, he discussed his proposal for the establishment of an institute for the study of corruption in Syria and advancement of transparency with visiting International Republican Institute program officer Hallem Ferguson and Poloff. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) A tired but upbeat Riad Seif met with Poloff on the night of February 1, joining a conversation between Poloff and his daughter, Joumana. Seif commented that the train of visitors had been continuing, with a 60-person delegation of political figures from Suweida, a predominantly Druze area in southern Syria, arriving on January 31 to pay their respects, as well as a mixture of Syrian civil-society figures, including Sunni Muslim leader Saleh Kuftaro. (NOTE: Human rights activist and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer Nehad Nahas, who has in past offered to serve as an intermediary between the MB and Post, immediately preceded Poloff's meeting with Seif; in the closing minutes of their meeting, during which Poloff was present, Nahas and Seif discussed the possibility of Seif doing a European lecture circuit, although it was unclear who the target audience would be. END NOTE.)

13. (C) SEIF DETAILS SARG,S MEASURES AGAINST PRESS CONFERENCE: Seif also detailed the events of January 31, when SARG security officials prevented a press conference by the five released Damascus Spring detainees at the office of Haithem Maleh. According to Seif, the press conference was to formally launch the campaign for the release of Arif Dalilah, Kamal Labwani, and other political prisoners. After arriving at 10:10 PM near Maleh's office, Seif saw approximately 200 police and secret police officers surrounding Maleh's office. Seif engaged in a "hot discussion" with the police, with the police officers physically pushing Seif from Maleh's office door to the main street 100 meters away. Seif stated that at one point he fell to the ground and pointed out a small bruise on his wrist resulting from the incident. He joked that it was "a pity there was no camera there" to capture the incident, but noted that there had been plenty of eye witnesses.

14. (C) Seif noted that he currently found most of his discussions with Syrian interlocutors centering around the issue of how the opposition should best deal with the West. He argued that the problems of the Syrian people had resulted from two strategic mistakes: first, the lack of democracy and

free markets; second, the spread of an anti-Western culture in the country. He also noted that the problems with Israel could have been solved had Syria spoken as a democracy. He reiterated his point from a previous meeting that the U.S. does not attack other democracies, and praised the U.S. reaction to the Hamas victory in Palestinian parliamentary elections as yet another example of this.

15. (C) CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY, REQUEST FOR DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE ON SARG: Seif then discussed what foreign governments should be doing to help his cause. He noted that the SARG now understands that he is the biggest threat to its power and fears that he could unite all opposition figures. While Seif asserted that "I refuse to be afraid," he repeated his concern about being re-arrested or being assassinated. He asked that the US, Canadian, EU, Australian, and the Japanese governments must give the SARG a strong warning on Seif's behalf. He said that the foreign governments should state that they expect, at a minimum, that Seif and his followers be granted the freedom of expression.

16. (C) Seif also repeated his request (reftel) that the USG provide documents that would help to discredit the SARG. Such documents would help undercut the SARG's claim to moral authority with the population at large and would include information on the positive treatment of "Muslims in the U.S. before September 11th", on SARG massacres and human rights violations, and "secret agreements" signed in 1974 by Hafez al-Asad and Henry Kissinger.

17. (C) AVERAGE SYRIANS STARTING TO SEE CRACKS IN SARG SYSTEM: Seif noted that Syrians were slowly becoming aware of the SARG's fundamental problems, and that the recent gas and cement price hikes were being felt by the average Syrian, and predicted that diesel prices would increase next. "The

SARG is going bankrupt," which Seif attributed to officials skimming off a growing percentage of oil profits. Seif was skeptical that Iran could help the SARG much as they "have their own problems." Seif also noted that the Parliament's reaction to former Vice President Abdulhalim Khaddam's statements had opened the eyes of many average Syrians to the corruption of the system.

18. (C) SEIF PITCHES ANTI-CORRUPTION THINK TANK: Seif then went on to outline his plans to establish an institute that would, in effect, serve as his party's think tank and would work to "uncover the truth about the SARG." The institute would need support from abroad, and Seif identified this to Poloff and visiting IDI representative Hal Ferguson as one area where the U.S. could assist. A military option against the SARG is unrealistic, said Seif; instead, the SARG can only be destroyed if Syrian society is enlightened about the real situation. Seif told Ferguson that training and capacity building for the three to four institute managers who will be selected shortly would be necessary, particularly in NGO management and research techniques. The institute would "help political activity" and would publish reports revealing corruption in Syrian society.

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